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'PiS now has a much stronger democratic mandate'

Ernst Hillebrand in Warsaw on PiS' electoral success, its strategy of moderation and the future of the Polish Left

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The right-wing nationalist Law and Justice Party (PiS) has again won the parliamentary elections in Poland — and even increased its majority. How did that happen?

With around 44 per cent, PiS is the clear winner of these elections. It gained six per cent more than in the last elections and still has an absolute majority in the Sejm. On Sunday, Polish voters rewarded PiS for its good economic and socio-political record — high economic growth, low unemployment, sharply rising wages, higher pensions, the introduction of child benefits and declining income inequality. Against this background, other issues remained of secondary importance. From surveys, we know that the electorate‘s motivation to vote for PiS was, by and large, the expectation that doing so would ensure an improvement in one's own life situation.

In its election campaign, PiS aimed at centrist voters and wanted to break the dominance of the opposition in the cities — almost all metropolitan areas are still in the hands of liberal mayors. Did PiS succeed?

In part certainly. But we have to wait for more precise election analyses. At the moment, it seems that PiS ranks second in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. In fact, during the election campaign the party tried to avoid very harsh rhetoric and, with a focus on socio-political issues, cultivated the image of an efficient caretaker party: a party that cares about the well-being of ordinary people, the silent majority and the average Pole. This average Pole, however, isn‘t very interested in ideological struggles, but rather in policies’ concrete economic and social effects.

After bad experiences in the European elections, the opposition Civic

Platform (PO) also avoided a "Kulturkampf" this time. That's why, on both sides, the more emotionally sensitive topics — which in Poland lie more in the socio-cultural than in the socio-economic area — remained in the background.

Recently, PiS presented itself as a moderate force. This stands in stark contrast to the beginning of its legislature, when it rapidly curtailed the rule of law and, in return, faced an infringement procedure from the EU. After this success, will PiS maintain a moderate course?

PiS now has a much stronger democratic mandate than after the last election, when it won a surprising absolute majority in the Sejm with only almost a third of the votes. It would be surprising if its politicians wouldn't see this as an affirmation by the voters and as a mandate to implement its programme. In this respect, we can assume that they will continue the reforms in the judiciary. However, now they say, in a form that is compatible with EU law. The party now simply has more time to choose its personnel, for promotions and appeals. It no longer has to use the sledgehammer, as it did in the last four years. In the Supreme Court alone, eleven judges will reach the age limit in the next four years, including Court President Malgorzata Gersdorf.

However, this will not change the fact that PiS' approach to personnel will be tough: Kaczyński still aims at exchanging the elites in the state and close to the state sector. On the whole, however, I would assume that the PiS will stick to the political line of recent months: with a focus on social issues and economic development, flanked by pursuing a patriotic, Catholic cultural and identity policy.

Why is the moderate image so important for the party?

Kaczyński wants to establish the party as a kind of natural party of government for Catholic Poland. To achieve this, the party's image must get out of the right-wing populist corner. And it stands a good chance. PiS is currently the most well-organised party in the country. It observes public opinion very carefully and, one hears and reads, takes note of the results of social research.

In the party, or in its environment, there are of course strongly ideologised, fundamentalist Catholic groups. Who will prevail in the end cannot be foreseen at the moment. As long as Kaczyński remains the central decision-making figure, the current, pragmatic course is likely to be maintained. Poland's society is very pro-European and in the midst of a process of everyday liberalisation and secularisation, which has been accelerated by the good economic development. Parties with ambitions to have a majority need to adapt to these tectonic shifts in society — or lose power.

What does the outcome of the election mean for the future of the left-wing alliance Lewica, which was founded before the election by the political parties SLD, Wiosna and Razem?

Lewica achieved a decent result with around 13 per cent, especially when you consider how the situation of the left-wing camp presented itself at the beginning of the summer: no representation in parliament, divided into three parties, all three either below or just above the five-percent hurdle. They were forced a little to do what's good for them — in other words, to merge. But then it worked out well and the alliance conducted a committed election campaign based on a balanced and wise joint programme covering a relatively wide range of issues. On environmental issues, Lewica was almost unrivalled. It should not be overlooked that it isn't easy for a left-wing movement in Poland to conduct an efficient election campaign at the moment: the traditional home turf of the left, the social and distributional sphere, is largely occupied by PiS.

Lewica now has 49 members of parliament in the Sejm who come from three different organisational cultures, generations and ideological niches. And they also have a certain tradition of mutual dislike. Forming a long-term stable political party or movement therefore requires political intelligence and tact. But on the other hand, the crisis of the liberal Civic Platform leaves the left much room for sharpening its profile in a modernising society. There are many topics: the problems of the health system, the high level of air pollution in Polish cities, the PiS's claim to political omnipotence, the question of the secular character of the state, the defence of the constitution, Poland's role in Europe — to name but a few. In this respect, we can be cautiously optimistic: so far, the Lewica experiment has worked surprisingly well.

Supported by young voters, the right-wing extremist Konfederacja managed to get into the Sejm for the first time with around seven per cent. How's the party organised and how could it affect the political power balance?

Konfederacja is a conglomeration of right-wing nationalist, fundamentalist Catholic and ultraliberal politicians: against the modernisation of society, against the European Union, against Germany. There's also a recognisable anti-Semitic undertone to this, in connection with unresolved issues of restitution of former Jewish property to descendants murdered in the Holocaust. Surprisingly, this group is particularly popular among young voters: among first-time voters it's even in third place — possibly as a bizarre form of protest party.

In the medium term, the presence of Konfederacja in the Sejm is more likely to help PiS: the presence of the right-wing extremist lunatic fringe in parliament automatically puts PiS in the centre from a psychological point of view — just as in Hungary Jobbik, in its original right-wing extremist form, improved how Fidesz and Viktor Orban were perceived, as opposed to harming the image. And this makes an all-party coalition of the parliamentary opposition against PiS completely impossible.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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